

Ordinary 20-A

St. Mary's Church

19 August 2017

Dear Father Pierre, Father Gabriel, and dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Introduction

This evening, as you do weekly, this community at St. Mary's gathers to celebrate Holy Mass, the Eucharist, the highpoint of our week when we praise and thank the good Lord for his many gifts to us, especially the gift of salvation, of being sons and daughters of God, who are brought into a relationship with him. But the Eucharist is also the occasion to thank God for lesser, but still important and meaningful gifts that he has showered upon us. One such gift is the priesthood, through which the Good Shepherd and Eternal High Priest makes his presence tangible and visible to us in the Sacraments presided over by the priest.

And so, tonight, we are thanking God for the gift of the priesthood exercised by Father Pierre Leblond here at St. Mary's for the last 11 years. Ordained now for 33 years he has spent one-third of his ministry with you as your pastor. And what a blessing he has been to you.

St. Mary's is known throughout the Archdiocese as a parish family of enormous apostolic activity. Under the guidance and direction of Father Pierre and Father Gabriel, approximately 50 different ministries are, by God's grace, flourishing. I'm sure Pope Francis would be very happy with what is happening here! You are missionary disciples who

are going out to the margins and fringes of Vancouver to bring the love of Jesus and the good news of God's merciful love that he brings.

But your pastor has also worked hard with you to build you up as a great community of praise and worship. Especially I wish to thank Father Pierre and his Dominican brothers for their ministry to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. They spend endless hours in the confessional as ministers of God's mercy: forgiving, healing, consoling and guiding souls in the path of salvation. This generosity has not only been a great blessing to St. Mary's parishioners but to countless others in the Archdiocese, for they know that Confessions are widely available here.

And so, Father Pierre, I wish to thank you wholeheartedly and with admiration, for your ministry as pastor of St. Mary's Parish. Your zeal for the Gospel, commitment to the people and above all your generous service are not only appreciated but also the reason why you are so deeply loved. You have indeed been a good shepherd during your ministry here, and we will all miss your presence at St. Mary's. But we know that you will pray for us, as we shall pray for you.

Gospel and Readings

Today's Gospel passage begins by indicating the district to which Jesus was going: Tyre and Sidon, to the north-west of Galilee, a pagan land. And it was here that he met a Canaanite woman who spoke to him,

asking him to heal her daughter who was possessed by a demon (cf. Mt 15:22). In her supplication we can already discern the beginning of a journey of faith, which in her conversation with the divine Teacher grows and becomes stronger.

The woman was not afraid to cry to Jesus “Have mercy on me,” (Mt 15:22), and she calls him “Lord” and “Son of David” (cf. Mt 15:22), thus showing a firm hope of being heard. Is she like us when we have a fervent prayer?

The Gospel tells us that, in turning to Jesus, the woman is brave, like any desperate mother who would do anything for the health of their child. She had been told that there was a good man, a prophet, and so she went to look for Jesus, even though she did not believe in the God of Israel. For the sake of her daughter she was not ashamed of how she might look before the Apostles, who might say amongst themselves “what is this pagan doing here?” She approached Jesus to beg him to help her daughter who was possessed by an unclean spirit.¹

What was the Lord’s attitude to this cry of anguish from a pagan woman? Jesus’ silence may seem disconcerting, to the point that it prompted the disciples to intervene that he send her away. But it was not a question of insensitivity to this woman’s sorrow. St Augustine rightly

¹ Cf. Francis, Morning Meditation (13 February 2014).

commented: “Christ showed himself indifferent to her, not in order to refuse her his mercy but rather to inflame her desire for it.”² Jesus knew exactly what He was doing. He wanted to *try* the faith of the Canaanite woman that the “genuineness of [her] faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (I Pt 1:7).

Lesson 1: Qualities of Petitionary Prayer

The apparent aloofness of Jesus who said: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt 15:24), did not discourage the Canaanite woman who persisted: “Lord, help me” (Mt 15:25). And she did not even desist when she received an answer that would seem to have extinguished any hope: “it is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” (Mt 15:26). She had no wish to take anything from anyone, In her simplicity and humility a little was enough for her: crumbs were enough; just a look, a kind word from the Son of God. And Jesus was struck with admiration for an answer of such great faith and said to her: “Let it done for you as you wish” (Mt 15:28).

Essentially, it is the story of a mother who risked making a fool of herself, but still insisted out of love for her daughter. She left paganism

² St. Augustine, *Sermo 77*, 1: PL 38, 483.

and idolatry, and found health for her daughter and, for herself she found the living God.³

Hers is the way of a person of good will, who seeks God and perseveres in prayer of petition. She never questions whether Jesus can cure her daughter and she perseveres in asking for his intervention. Moreover, she shows remarkable humility, taking no offence at the comparison of non-Jews to house pets. She accepts that she has no claim on the God of Israel.

Lesson 2: Don't Push People Away

In your Christian lives, you will find many occasions that will tempt you, like the disciples in today's Gospel, to push away the stranger, the needy, the poor and the broken-hearted. It is these people especially who repeat the cry of the woman of the Gospel: "Lord, help me!" "Have mercy on me."

The Canaanite woman's plea is the cry of everyone who searches for love, acceptance, and friendship with Christ. It is the cry of so many people in our city, the cry of so many of our own contemporaries. It is often a cry which rises from our own hearts as well: "Lord, help me!" Let us respond, not like those who push away people who make demands on us, as if serving the needy gets in the way of our being close

³ Cf. Francis, Morning Meditation (13 February 2014).

to the Lord. No! We are to be like Christ, who responds to every plea for his help with love, mercy and compassion.⁴

Lesson 3: Universality of Salvation

The Gospel passage that recounts the episode of the Canaanite woman, a foreigner for the Jews, whose wish was granted by Jesus because of her great faith. The Reading from the Prophet Isaiah: “And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him... these will I bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer. . . for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Is 56: 6-7).

In the Second Reading the Apostle Paul also refers to the universality of salvation: “For God has imprisoned all in disobedience [original and actual sin] so that he may be merciful to all” (Rom 11:32). The Word of God today gives us an opportunity to reflect on the universality of the mission of the Church which is made up of people of every race and culture.

From precisely this stems the great responsibility of the ecclesial community which is called to be a hospitable home for all, a sign and instrument of communion for the entire human family.

⁴ Francis, Homily, Closing Sixth Asian Youth Day, Korea (17 August 2014).

How important it is, especially in our time, that we increasingly deepen our awareness of this expansiveness of God's in order also to help our society overcome every possible temptation to give into racism, intolerance and exclusion and to make decisions that respect the dignity of every human being!

One of humanity's great recent achievements is in fact its triumph over racism. However, unfortunately disturbing new forms of racism are being manifested in various countries around the world. They are often related to social and economic problems which can, however, never justify contempt and racial discrimination. Let us pray that respect for every person everywhere will increase, together with a responsible awareness that only in the reciprocal acceptance of one and all is it possible to build a world distinguished by authentic justice and true peace.⁵

Conclusion

We continue our Eucharistic celebration now with trust that, despite our unworthiness, the Lord will come to us with the comfort of his presence as we say, "say but the word and my soul shall be healed."

✦ J. Michael Miller, CSB
Archbishop of Vancouver

⁵ Cf. Benedict XVI, Angelus (17 August 2008).